

Encouraging Interfaith Dialogues

By Karen P. Hughes

As I have traveled the world the last two years on behalf of America's public diplomacy, I have often met people whose faith has inspired them to do great good. I've met Muslim American doctors who traveled to Pakistan to help victims of the earthquake there, Catholic nuns who helped families left homeless by mudslides in Central America, volunteers from many nations who help fight AIDS or malaria in Africa or build schools in Afghanistan. I have seen firsthand that there are people of good will in *all* faiths and cultures.

In America, people of many different faiths—and those of no faith—live side by side and try to respect each other's views. We are not perfect, and religion is sometimes a source of division, but respect for each other's diverse beliefs is our goal—and in the aftermath of September 11, many Christian, Jewish and Muslim Americans reached out to try to better understand each other.

I have found that people of all faiths have much in common. As a Christian, my highest commandments are to love God and love my neighbor—my Muslim and Jewish friends tell me the same is true for them. The open letter this fall from 138 Muslim scholars to Christian leaders expressed the exact same thought. It said love of God and love of neighbor—"the two greatest commandments"—are "an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament."

While there are significant theological differences, ultimately, I believe the vast majority of people of every faith and culture want similar things for themselves and their families—education and health care, a safe neighborhood, a good job—and most people want their lives to make a difference, to leave our world a little better than before. These are not dreams unique to any nation or people, but shared human dreams. Despite differences of language or culture or skin color, so much more unites us than divides us.

I have found two major misperceptions in my conversations around the world. First, in many Muslim-majority nations, people worry that the war against terror is directed at them. I want to assure our friends across the world that this is not the case. Most Americans recognize that terrorists do not represent—but instead pervert—all faiths with their barbaric acts. Many of America's citizens have roots in the Arab world; others come from virtually every culture and faith. Islam is also part of the West and a part of America—several million American Muslims live, work and worship freely in the United States.

The second major misperception comes from my fellow Americans. Contrary to a common perception, Muslims do speak out against terrorist violence—often and forcefully. Afghanistan's President Karzai has condemned suicide bombing as contrary to Islam and says terrorists "cheat children" by recruiting them. The secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference speaks out strongly against terrorist acts. In Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a leader of the "Sahwa" reform movement, sent an open letter condemning Usama bin Laden for murdering innocents: "This religion that

protects the sanctity of blood—even that of the birds and animals—can never approve the killing of the innocent whatever the reasons or motives might be.”

The time has come when good people of all faiths must join together to state clearly that killing oneself in order to kill others is wrong and a matter of shame—never honor. There are many legitimate grievances in our world, but none can justify the murder of innocents.

America wants to be a partner in interfaith dialogues. We are working to highlight the many voices speaking out against terrorist violence and for greater interfaith understanding. We are encouraging conversations among cultures. In a new program called “Citizen Dialogue,” we’ve sent Muslim American citizens across the world to engage with citizens in Muslim communities. We’ve sponsored summer programs for young people, teaching respect for diversity. We’ve sent out musicians to promote tolerance and to show that differences can enrich rather than divide.

We all are part of an increasingly interconnected world that calls on each of us—no matter what our culture or faith community—to work for peace, life, and hope. As the open letter from 138 Muslim scholars notes, “our common future is at stake” and we must “sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony.”

This year, the world is celebrating the 800th anniversary of the birth of Rumi, the great Sufi poet, who wrote, “When someone asks what there is to do, light the candle in their hand.” Through dialogue, we are lighting candles—and I hope their light will burn brightly across the world.

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